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ABSTRACT

This paper claims that broad educational policies and the "one best model" approach are not conducive to rural school improvement. It examines the problems with state policies and offers some solutions. Teacher certification has become increasingly narrow. Certification should allow for more generalist certifications, easier access to obtaining additional certifications, and sharing of specialists among schools. Curriculum problems include tracking, an emphasis on improving standardized test scores, and a standardized curriculum based on urban schools. Curriculum should be integrated, non-tracked, hands-on, and community-relevant. Teacher training tends to be biased toward urban, suburban, and affluent schools. Teacher training should offer more rural practicums and exposure to rural issues. Funding strategies based on a "head count" formula do not account for rural transportation costs and local ability to supplement state funds. Funding formulas should be weighted for sparsity and the state should provide funding for specialists it requires each school to have. Accreditation standards are generally based on what is put into a particular school, not on the quality that comes out of the school. Accreditation should be based on such qualities as leadership, high expectations, and respect. Consolidation does not account for the human and financial costs of aggregating students in rural areas. The strengths of small schools should be recognized. (KS)

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Broad Policies, Local Schools: Re-Thinking Rural Education in an Age of Reform

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"Broad Policies, Local Schools" is purposely an oxymoron. It is intended to raise questions of how blanket policies can be appropriate for all local schools. Reform movements almost always result in the development and implementation of broad policies. These are not always so well-founded or examined as the word "reform" suggests they should be. For all its talk of re-structuring and school-based improvement, the reform movement of the 1980s has been largely a top-down effort. Almost every state has initiated more or less sweeping reforms through either its State Department of Education or the governor's office. These efforts are developed by a centralized authority and apply to virtually all schools in the state. They are based on the assumption that there is one single model which is best for all schools. I am indebted to David Tyack for his work, The One Best System, (Harvard University Press, 1974) which critiques this assumption and provides a useful term to describe it.

A few analogies will help illustrate the point. No wise parent would develop one set of rules and apply them unbendingly to all their children. A wise parent certainly has clear guidelines for what is expected of their children. But, each child is known individually and rules are enforced depending on the nature of that child and his or her particular circumstance. The "one best model" approach to schooling contains no such wisdom. It applies uniform rules to all schools regardless of the inherent nature of each individual school or of its particular economic and geographic circumstance. I would argue, however, that this paternalistic metaphor is inappropriate for schools. Public schools are afterall PUBLIC institutions. They are located in communities governed by adults. They were established orginally to serve the local community as an education provider and as an institution which brought citizens together in common concern and action to govern the school's activities. A shift to a paternalistic and centralized authority enforcing rules on local residents is a dangerous shift away from a strong American democratic tradition.

Suppose, however, that reforms are set out, not as laws to be enforced on recalcitrant children, but as models to which all schools should aspire. If these reforms are general and beneficent, for example, local schools should provide equal access to educational programs for all its children in a physically safe facility, then the reforms might be called standards of justice. They are not only appropriate but necessary. However, if the reforms are extremely specific, for example: every good high school offers a two-track diploma system, then the standards will begin to contravene the strengths and imaginations of local schools and communities. A high school in which all students take advanced courses does not need a two track diploma system. When schools are forced to aspire to something they are not, they risk not being the best that they can be. Everyone has known someone who "puts on airs", who tries to be something they have been led tobelieve is better than who they are naturally. Such a person is invariably annoying. We

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find ourselves saying, "if he would only be himself he would be so much nicer. . . or smarter. . . or more productive." The natural strengths and contributions of such a person are buried under their efforts to be something they are not.

It is essential to understand how the "one best model" approach has permeated much of our educational practice if one is to understand how broad policies affect local, particularly rural and small, schools. The "one best model" is the fallacy on which many policies and reform efforts are built. It suggests what size schools should be, what specific curriculum should be covered and how, how all teachers should be trained, what standardized criteria must be met for a school to attain accreditation. Its models are particularly detrimental to rural and small schools because they are almost always based on urban and suburban circumstances and because they frequently are not guidelines for justice but rules for enforcement.

Rural is different from urban and suburban. More than anything else it is characterized by diversity. Across the country and within states there is more variety among and in rural communities than there is in most cities. In the southeast, there are appalachian, coastal, Black belt, Native American, mining, farming, and bedroom rural communities. Our communities differ dramatically from those of New England, the mid-West, and the desert southwest. There are, however, many characteristics rural communities almost everywhere share. The first is population sparsity. There simply are fewer people in rural areas. Many people in rural areas are, therefore, generalists with a breadth of knowledge and a variety of skills. Rural communities tend to be inclusive and cooperative -- everyone is needed if an activity is going to be successful. Rural cultures tend to be oriented toward action and the production of tangible products -- people make things. Finally, rural areas tend to be resource rich but money poor. Rural communities are rich in human resources, in shared memories, in social and familial connections, in cultural traditions, in the basic skills by which human life is sustained. Increasingly, however, rural communities are places where physical resources are extracted and where communities and residents have less disposible money income.

We see that many of these characteristcs -- diversity, generalist skills and knowledge, mental and physical dexterity, the capacity to create, and a valuing of human relationships -- are increasingly the characteristics advocated for a strong economy, a healthy environment, and a quality education. Nevertheless, most reforms and the policies they generate are antithetical to these very characteristics. While it is not the purpose of this presentation to examine the historical roots of modern reforms, it is worth noting that most are more extensive versions of policies which have been around a long time. This presentation will examine six common state policies, their effects on small and rural schools, and some promising alternatives.

I. TEACHER CERTIFICATION. Ostensibly teacher certification is an attempt to ensure than teachers are qualified to teach their subject matter. There is nothing problemmatical about such a goal. However, areas of certification have become increasingly narrow as teachers are trained to teach a more and more limited range of courses. This reflects the dominance of a belief in specialization. The old adage about Ph.D.'s might be apt for some teaching certificates, that is, you know more and more about less and less until you know everything about nothing. There are several problems which grow out of the very narrow range of subject matter for which teacher obtain license to teach.

Problems of Narrow Certifications.

1) Narrow certifications make it difficult to integrate curriculum across subject areas. Integration of material, concepts, and skills is an important element of good education.

2) Frequently the number of specialists needed to teach all the subjects required is more than a small school can afford. Since subject area specialists are generally required most often at the secondary level, schools are often forced to adjust their teaching loads in less than satisfactory ways. For example, the concentration of specialists at the secondary level often results in increased class size at the elementary level as local schools and school systems try to reduce the overall number of teachers employed. This model also forces middle grades into a departmentalized high school model although there is evidence to suggest that self-contained classrooms are the most beneficial to young adolescents.

3) The difficulty rural teachers face in obtaining additional certifications in order to expand the range of courses they can teach is often prohibitive. Often a large number of extra courses are required and these courses are not accessible to working teachers who live far from colleges and universities.

4) It is often difficult for educated people who decide they want to teach to obtain a teaching certificate. Native speakers of a foreign language, engineers, artists, and others with special skills may find it next to impossible to meet all requirements for a teaching certificate despite demonstrated skill in their field and their desire to teach.

Solutions for Certification Problems.

1) More generalist certifications should be offered an the grades covered should be expanded. This solution will require rigorous academic content in college courses with a limited number of strong professional and methodology courses. Certificates which prepare someone to be a math/science generalist or an English/humanities generalist would foster much stronger curriculum integration and would reduce the number of specialists required of a school. Elementary certificates which include strong preparation in art, music, and physical education and cover seventh, eighth, and even ninth grades would be educationally and fiscally sound.

2) Programs should be offered which make it easier for people who are currently teaching to obtain additional certifications. This will require offering courses in specially scheduled times and in formats accessible to people who live a long way from the college or university. The University of Alabama's PACERS program enabled 100 schools to obtain a certified foreign language teacher. It offered all the courses needed for a second certification in Spanish and French in summer and weekend classes. Consideration should also be given to reducing the number of courses required for additional certification in some subject areas, especially those related to subject areas in which the teacher already has certification or for teachers who have demonstrated capacity to master and teach a subject effectively. (Examples provided in oral presentation.)

3) Teachers who obtain additional certification, especially in critical needs areas, should receive additional compensation. The education obtained and service provided by a teacher with several certifications is comparable to that of a masters degree.

4) Programs such as the PACERS program described above should be made available to college graduates who wish to teach but do not have a certificate. These programs should include credit for successful current or previous teaching experience.

5) Provisions should be made to make it easier for schools to share specialist teachers through itineration, part-time positions, and interactive teaching technologies. Many subject areas which require specialized knowledge are only taught to a small number of students in a limited number of class periods. Enabling these specialist teachers to work in several schools would greatly increase their impact.

II. CURRICULUM. Many reforms of the 1980s have been aimed at increasing advanced classes, instituting Honors Diplomas or other tracked high school curricula, and improving scores on standardized tests. These goals become serious detriments to the effective functioning of a school if they are the determining factors in the school's curriculum.

Problems of Standardized Curriculum for Rural and Small Schools.

1) Tracked high school curricula face all the philosophical problems associated with any kind of academic tracking: they are predicated on the belief that "some students can't." A two track diploma system forces schools to put some students in the "bottom" track almost guaranteeing that their achievement will be reduced. This kind of tracking disrupts the basic inclusiveness and cooperative learning characteristic of small rural schools. It requires two classes per grade, an expensive and unmanageable prospect for many small schools.

2) The goal of improving standardized test scores tends toward a curriculum which is seat-work oriented and abstracted from the experiences and intellectual lives of students. It may teach students test-taking strategies or how to "bubble in" more effectively but it rarely stimulates curiosity or real academic interest. A test-oriented curriculum tends to produce scores rather than tangible products so it is unnatural to what is characteristic of rural. It makes learning a private transaction between student and teacher or student and test-giver; it does not make the student accountable to anyone else and at best fosters a kind of individualistic and competitive achievement mentality. A further problem of such standardized tests is they tend to measure knowledge, experiences, and language of a dominant urban and suburban culture. They tend not to measure well what rural and culturally different students know. This is especially significant in the southeast. (Examples in the oral presentation.)

3) Curriculum tends to be oriented toward urban and suburban schools. Textbooks are developed for major urban centers and states which are major purchasers. There is an implicit devaluation of rural in this type curriculum. Students learn about distant places but not about their own communities; they learn about the supreme court without learning about the probate court or about international economics without learning about the economics of their own communities. (Examples provided in the oral presentation.) As a result we are losing important skills, memories, traditions, cultures, and perspectives that are uniquely local and rural.

Some Solutions to Current Problems of Curriculum.

1) Curriculum should be integrated and non-tracked as much as possible. It should incorporate peer and cross-grade tutoring and allow for both individual and cooperative group work. Curriculum appropriate to multi-grade classrooms should be developed. This goal will be easier with more generalist teachers.

2) The curriculum should be hands-on and focused on the production of tangible public results. The rural value of "learning by doing" should be recovered in rural schools. Hands-on learning with public results produces knowledge with more staying power and increases the confidence and motivation of students. Such a curriculum will place less emphasis on test score improvement but could well produce that result.

3) The curriculum should include a strong focus on the local community. This focus will inevitably increase hands-on opportunities for students; it will value students' cultural inheritances which are often devalued and will introduce students to people and skills which they should know.

4) Field trips should be encouraged, especially in schools where many students are poor and have few opportunities to travel.

III. TEACHER TRAINING. In addition to the problems cited with many current certification requirements, teacher training tends to be biased toward urban, suburban, and affluent schools. It is often less than satisfactory preparation for teachers in rural schools.

Problems of Urban-Based Teacher Training.

1) Teacher training tends to be oriented toward urban schools and heavily dependent on purchased materials and equipment. This training does not prepare prospective teachers for the different characterisitics of rural schools and the more limited financial resources available to them.

2) Urban-based teacher training does not prepare teachers to understand rural schools. It can blind teachers to the strengths of small schools: their familial and inclusive nature, their high levels of student and parent participation and community support, and their flexibility and personal responsiveness. Methodologies of student tracking, dependence on purchased materials, and specialization can actually be disruptive in small schools. And, urban-based training tends not to examine the roots of many difficulties facing rural schools and communities including cultural devaluation and public and economic policies.

Suggestions for Teacher Training for Rural Schools.

1) Practicums with real responsibiities should be provided in rural schools for prospective teachers.

2) Information about rural schools should be incorporated into history and philosophy of education classes. This should include a strong historical perspective and should emphasize the diversity and contributions of rural schools, communities, and culture. These courses should seek to overcome the prejudices many people feel toward rural areas.

3) Prospective teachers should be provided with factual information about funding, certification, taxation, and public and educational policies and their effects on rural schools. Like any good academic discipline this should contain analysis and criticism of the education profession itself in constant efforts to inform and improve its practitioners.

4) Teachers, administrators, and students from rural schools should be invited to speak to groups of prospectives teachers.

5) Prospective teachers should be introduced to teaching methods which are not heavily dependent on purchased materials and which take advantage of the characteristic strengths of small and rural schools.

6) Prospective teachers should be introduced to interactive teaching technologies so that they have an open and imaginative attitude about the use of alternative and distance learning strategies.

IV. FUNDING. Most state funding strategies rely on some version of a "head count" formula which allots a designated number of dollars and/or teacher units per child in the school district. For example, a district with 1,000 students might earn 40 teacher units, one for every 25 students, $200 of instructional money per teacher, $10 in library allotment per child, and $15 per transported child. On the surface this appears to be an equitable formula, but it has serious problems, especially for rural school districts.

Problems with Most State Funding Formulae.

1) Head-count based formulae do not acoount for the costs of sparsity. These costs include transportation which is generally reimbursed at a fixed rate regardless of the distance involved. Many rural districts do not earn enough in their state formula to cover the costs of all the specialists and support personnel required by the state.

2) Head-count formulae do not account for variations in local ability to supplement state funds with local revenues. In some states, such as Alabama, state tax laws severely limit the revenues which rural counties can raise by virtually prohibiting the adequate taxation of property, the only commodity rural counties have which can produce significant public revenue. Head-count formulae also fail to account for the variations in school facilities and resources that develop over time as a result of tremendous variations in local public and private wealth. (Examples provided in oral presentation.)

3) Small rural schools often have tremendous variations in enrollment across grade levels. It would be no surprise to have a fourth grade with 37 students and a second grade with twelve. Current formulae are not flexible enough to accommodate these grade to grade fluctuations in which students cannot be spread out over several classes as in larger schools.

4) Most state formulas are inflexible. They stipulate how all funds are to be spent leaving little room for decision-making which might re-allocate funds for expenditures more beneficial to the local school.

5) Head count formulae contain intrinsic consolidation incentives. They reward the aggregation of students in one place by reducing the total number of specialists, building-level administrators and support personnel required of a school district. (Example provided in oral presentation.) They fail, however, to account for the human and transportation costs incurred.

Solutions to the Problems of Funding for Rural and Small Schools.

1) Funding formulae should include a weight for sparsity. Distance costs money and rural students should not be penalized because they live further away from each other than their more urban counterparts. This weight, for reasons which will be addressed, should not be an incentive for consolidation.

2) State formulas and taxation policies should be more flexible with regard to local ability. This may involve allowing local communities more authority in levying taxes; it could provide additional financial support for schools in poor communities. It should not, however, carry with it increased state control of local schools which will tend toward "one best model" interferences. Neither should it do away with local districts by aggregating them into several large districts where spending is equalized across districts but remains unequal between schools. It should be borne in mind that high quality schools tend to be located in communities with a high degree of local support and involvement.

3) The State should provide funding for all those specialists and support personnel positions it requires each school to have.

4) Funding formulae should be much more flexible. They should include provisions which account for grade to grade variations in class size which will occur in rural schools. They should allow local schools and school districts much more latitude to determine how to best spend funds in their schools. (Examples provided in oral presentation.) Funding formulae should support the use of innovative teaching stategies such as interactive technologies, multi-grade groupings, and new curriculum development. These innovations are needed in rural schools.

5) State budgetary processes should account for a variety of public costs influenced by schooling arrangements but not reflected in education budgets. For example, the costs to society of drop outs, the loss of local businesses, and rural outmigration which occurs when rural schools are closed.

V. ACCREDITATION. Accreditation standards are generally based on "inputs", that is on what is put into a particular school. These include such inputs as number of books in the library, type of lab facilities, number of specialist teachers, and even the number of students. The trouble with these standards is they have little bearing on the quality of what comes out of the school. (Jonathan Sher, Class Dismissed: Examining Nebraska's Rural Education Debate) By their standardized "one best model" approach, accreditation standards often contravene the best possibilities of rural schools.

Common Problems of Accreditation Standards.

1) Input standards reflect more than anything the affluence of the school district. They suggest that economic resources, almost by themselves, will educate students. They do not account for how these resources are used or how schools without them might be using innovative strategies for educating their students.

2) Public school accreditation standards in many states require a certain number of students to even be considered for accreditation. These standards make no attempt to justify their claim that students only learn well when surrounded by a designated number of other children of exactly the same age. Neither do they account for the costs to students of aggregating the designated number of children together in one place in rural areas. In Alabama, for example, proposed "performance based" accreditation standards would require every high school to have a least 58 students per grade.

3) "Performance-based" standards often only measure scores on standardized tests and require that a certain percentage of students attain a minimum score. These standards do not account for the weak ability of standardized tests to measure the achievement of poor, culturally different, and minority youngsters. They do not account for the purely practical consideration that for every above average score there are a roughly equal number of below average scores. Nor do they account for the detrimental effects of a test-oriented curriculum.

4) Accreditation standards frequently contain no way to credit the innovative efforts of schools and so reward the same old practices.

Some Alternative Approaches to School Accreditation.

1) Beyond expecting a minimal level of "inputs" which insure basic safety, accreditation should be based more on what Jonathan Sher calls "throughputs". These include the following: A) strong, positive leadership; B) high expectations of students and teachers; C) respectful relationships among student, teachers and administrators; D) individualized instruction and attention; E) an emphasis on academic basics; F) parental/community involvement and support; G) fair and frequent feedback to both students and teachers; H) friendly classroom and school climate; I) a healthy balance of activities fostering the intellectual physical, emotional and social development of students; and J) a tolerance for individual intitiatives and for trying new approaches to learning. (Sher, Class Dismissed) All of these "throughput" are attained *at least* as easily in a small school located in close proximity to its community.

2) Accreditation standards should move away from such arbitrary regulations as a minimum number of students per grade and full-time specialists regardless of the size of the school or the need for those specialists.

3) Accreditation standards should not hold schools to single models of acceptability. They should recognize innovation, effort, imaginative use of available resources, and the responsiveness of the school to the needs of its particular students and its particular community.

VI. CONSOLIDATION. Consolidation is both the result of and the underlying incentive for many of the previously mentioned policies. It is based on two basic tacit assumptions. The first is that "bigger is better". The second is that rural is somehow backward. A quick perusal of the literature and history of consolidation will inform the reader of the deep roots of these beliefs. It will bring to light the original purpose of consolidation to break the cultural, familial and community ties of immigrant and rural young people. School consolidation advocates today assert that larger schools make available more courses at less cost. There are, however, a number of problems associated with consolidation in rural areas.

Problems of Consolidation in Rural Areas.

1) Consolidation does not account for the human and financial costs of aggregating students in rural areas. It is expensive both in dollars and time to bus students long distances. The costs of transportation often outweigh any savings which might occur by putting students together in one facility.

2) Consolidation assumes that curricular additions will naturally occur and that they will be beneficial. In fact, curricular additions are generally insignificant as a result of consolidation. There is increasing skepticism as to how important a large range of student electives is to a quality education. (Examples provided in oral presentation.)

3) Consolidation does not account for the effects on students of the time involved in their travel, the reduced opportunities for participation afforded them (examples provided in oral presentation), or the personal atmosphere of the small school which is lost.

4) Consolidation does not account for the effects on communities of the loss of their schools. These effects are tremendous because the school is a rural community's basic economic and social resource. Its closure almost always affects local businesses, the access to services of community residents, and the community's ability to maintain its cohesiveness.

Some Alternatives to Consolidation.

1) It is important for rural school practitioners and public policy makers to recognize the strengths of small schools. These include the following: A) strong community and parent support; B) high levels of student participation and the personal and skill development which accompanies involvement; C) low levels of student disciplinary problems, vandalism, substance abuse, and drop-outs; D) the ability of small schools to draw students into core academic courses; E) the ability of small schools to be flexible, to know personally all its students, and to tailor academic and personal responses to individuals; and F) the maturity that comes to students from being known and therefore accountable, from being expected to participate and achieve, and from having to learn to get along with a variety of people.

2) The long-term savings to society which result fro these advantages of small schools should be acknowledged.

3) Many promising education strategies such as peer tutoring, hands-on activities, parent involvement, cooperative learning, and local curriculum development can occur easily in the context of a small school.

4) The development of interactive technologies, generalist teacher certifications, multi-age student groupings, and curriculum appropriate for local communities eliminate the need for consolidation to meet "one best model" standards, add courses, or save money. These strategies are much more future-oriented than the backward-looking, fossil fuel dependent model of the school bus which is the symbol of consolidation.

SOME FINAL RESPONSES.

It is clear that many of our "one best model" policies are detrimental to small and rural schools. They force schools to be things which they cannot be without serious harm to rural students and to the educational process. Beyond the risk these policies pose to rural kids and communities, the values which underpin them may pose risks to our entire educational endeavor. These values are worth examining. The first is elitism. A tracked, pyramidal model of schooling evoked by a dual diploma system suggests that for some to excel others must not. The limited number of opportunities for participation and recognition available to students in large high schools further insures that opportunities will go to those students whose abilities and confidences are most obvious. These circumstances suggest to students that individual achievement and recognition are all-important and can only be attained by some if denied to others. Elitism is not only antithetical to rural it is antithetical to American democracy, to an American value that all people are expected and entitled to achieve and to take part. A second value which may be unwittingly fostered is passivity. Large schools force most students into the role of spectator rather than active participant. They instill in students the notion that they cannot take part and that their own actions cannot bring about significant results (unless those actions are intentionally disruptive). Third, large, tracked, and specialized schools divide students into homogenous groups. They undercut students' abilities to understand, appreciate, and get along with other kinds of people. The isolation of people from one another which occurs in large anonymous settings contributes to unhealthy personal and group behavior. Finally, by imposing only one model of acceptable schooling, educational and cultural diversity is limited. The skills, insights, and perspectives of diversity are lost. These values do not bode well for the future of democratic society nor for entrepreneurial activity.

A serious re-thinking of educational policy is needed. It must not only allow but encourage diversity. It should esteem the traditions of particular communities and indigenous cultures while it encourages innovation. It must examine the basic and historical values of democracy and consider how these are reflected (or not) in the structures and methods through which we school our young people. Quality education begins at the local level with commitments and skills of local people; it requires that the local place be known. It cannot be mandated from a centralized bureaucracy. This approach to quality education risks local failures, but it avoids the catastrophe of national failure which we are risking with many of our current educational policies. Rural schools are in good stead to meet this challenge, but they must be protected from broad policies which contravene their strengths or do away with them altogether. There is much to be learned from and about small rural schools. It is time we get about this task